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Msiska, Mpalive Hangson (2017) Rethinking the future of humanities in Africa and the question of epistemological agency. *Journal of Humanities, University of Malawi* 25 (1), pp. 5-30. ISSN 1016-0728.

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Rethinking the future of Humanities in Africa and the question of epistemological agency

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Abstract

Using Bergson's theory of history and Foucault's concept of knowledge as power, among others, the paper argues that the field of Humanities in Africa should be reconceptualised into *African Humanities* in order to effect what Deleuze and Guattari have defined as conceptual *self-semiotisation*. The discipline must undertake, as in the past, a continual critique of the concept of the *human subject*, but without dethroning it as proposed by some Post-structuralists. It must focus on how globalisation, science and technology impinge on the formation of subjectivity in Africa, including Malawi. Moreover, it must enact a strategic epistemological self-determination by appropriating, adapting and reconstituting received dominant theories and practices, which entails being both counter-hegemonic and consciously, but selectively, part of the dominant formation. It offers other strategies for implementing that shift, such as the deployment of the historical traditions of epistemological resistance as well as cultural and political decolonisation, as those advanced by Achebe, Ngugi, Soyinka, Chimombo, Oruka and Wiredu, among others.

Keywords: African, Malawi, Epistemology, Human, Humanities, Subject

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time (Eliot,
1944: 30).

Introduction

The quotation above from Eliot suggests that our quest for knowledge leads us to where we started from, as places and things we had known before reveal new truths, giving us a heightened cognition of our original points of departure as well as what is possible. It is a view influenced by Bergson's notion of *duration*, which regards the past and the future as part of the same *duration* of temporality in what he terms the principle of *succession with simultaneity* (Bergson, 1971). Unlike in the familiar *developmental progressivist* view of history embodied, for instance, in Hegel's philosophy (Hegel, 1807), in Bergson's the future is not something ahead of us in some distant and far removed temporal space, but it is already with us and may have been with us for a long time. It is this view of temporality and human agency that underpins my present reflections on what should be an agenda for the future theory and practice of Humanities in Africa. In what follows I argue that the future of Humanities in Africa is here and has been. We only require to abstract what is to become from what *is* and *has been*. We need to ask ourselves what we can learn from the past and present formation of Humanities in Africa to see what we can fashion into an agenda for action for the future.

My view is that the Humanities in Africa must continue to map out the specific ways in which the local and the global simultaneously determine the human subject in Africa. Taking a leaf out of Deleuze's and Guattari's book (2004), in rethinking Humanities in Africa, we must *semiotise* or *signify* ourselves in order not only to apprehend fully our specific existential location, but also to ensure that our epistemological practice actively *de-universalises*, *decolonises* and *dethrones* the dominant ideas in global

Humanities. Even so, as Humanities scholars in Africa, we should continue with the main historical concern of Humanities, that is, to inquire into the changing nature of the human, but doing so by finding out how the human in our continent and in Malawi is shaped by his or her contingent location.

In short, we must seek to grasp how the local and the global transform our subjectivities and their contexts, and how that in turn impinges on the Humanities as the site of a particular production of knowledge. That should result in an academic cultural practice that is true, if not always to all, at least to some of the progressive principles of its foundation, whilst remaining innovative. Such a practice will be necessarily transformative, since it will be concerned with illuminating how in this particular corner of the globe, the human is manifested, produced and moving into the future. So, it will be by capturing the *being in movement* of the human in Africa and, especially, Malawi that we will be contributing towards understanding the global formation of being human. By emphasising the idea of the human as production, we are keeping faith with the founding principles of our discipline in the nineteenth century as well as their radical reinterpretation in the Post-Marxist and Post-structuralist critical formation in the twentieth century. We must also continue to subject all our founding ideas, even their most persuasive revisions and epistemic breaks, under constant review, so they are reanimated or replaced altogether by more adequate readings. My contention is that an effective and visionary agenda for the future of Humanities in Malawi and Africa must be both *foundational and critical*.

The identity of Humanities in Africa

I have so far been speaking as if the idea of African Humanities is a settled matter. Are we here talking about the future of *African Humanities* in Africa or the future of Humanities in Africa? Our response to this important question has implications for how we conceive the future of the discipline in Africa. I think we are talking about both, but for analytical purposes we need to keep them separate. Clarification of the character of each

element may help us work out how to combine them in order to achieve particular objectives in future. I will start by foregrounding the global character of the discipline and close with its local or indigenous dimension. Thus, we can say firmly that we are talking about the Humanities in Africa, as a product of the global history of the formation of the discipline. In this regard, Humanities in Africa, like Humanities internationally, employ similar concepts, teaching and research methods and, thus, the field is located similarly, as a site of learning and research, within the African academy as elsewhere. Of course, there will be minor differences of articulation and practice here and there, but, by and large, Humanities in Africa are part of an international academic and intellectual formation.

Humanities in Africa are global in terms of the cultural production of academic authority. The formation of our identity as scholars is very much determined by our relationship to the international Humanities community. To use Fish's concept (1980), we belong to an international *interpretative community*. Of course, the community is differentiated in terms of our particular sub-disciplines or critical persuasions. Nevertheless, belonging to an international *interpretive community* means employing what Foucault (1972) has defined as a *discursive formation*, a set of regulations, statements and values as to what constitutes legitimate knowledge. That necessarily entails selecting certain issues, ideas and texts as the defining elements of the field. The community and its discourses constitute a *regime of truth* which not only regulates the discipline, but also forms a point of coalescence of heterogeneous power relations in society (Foucault, 1980: 130). In other words, sites of knowledge, such as Humanities are about authority, power and the social production of truth.

In order for one to belong to such a community, one has to be socialised through training, which for us here in Africa, involves predominantly being inducted into the arcane arts of the Humanities in the West or, in recent years, South Africa. A certificate from these institutions endows one with the authority

to claim possession of the capacity to deploy masterly the *official discursive regime*. So, when we say Humanities in Africa are part of a global intellectual formation, we are really saying that the discipline and its practitioners are embedded within the global network of Humanities scholarship and pedagogy. They are located in Africa, but they are also situated in a global nexus of formation. That location is also subject to relations of power, most of which have to do with the history of colonialism and Neo-colonialism. In this respect, the African scholars rely for their professional credibility on conforming to the international disciplinary standards. Of course, there is no reason why one cannot opt out of this formation, but the price for doing so would be academic marginalisation.

We are part of the *global Humanities formation* not only for reasons of knowledge production, regulation and dissemination, but equally because of a shared past of disciplinary formation. The presence of Humanities in Africa today is a result of a particular history — that of colonial acculturation into Western values, languages and modes of thought. The idea of Humanities, as both a conceptual category and institutional practice in Africa, arises out of the formation of Humanities in nineteenth-century Europe, as the founders of the discipline sought a return to both Classical learning and Renaissance *Humanism* (Davies, 2008: 3-4). They revived the human-centred focus that had been elaborated by Renaissance scholars, such as Erasmus through their concept of *Humanism*. *Humanism* was a celebration of the human perspective on the world as opposed to the traditional ones which regarded the human subject as an extension of an external order, either divine or natural.

The Humanities-Science divide: Present, past and future

The issues raised during the formation of the discipline still reverberate today, for instance the relationship between Humanities and Science. For the Renaissance scholars, *Humanism* included both, but, for the nineteenth century, even whilst promoting the idea of *Renaissance man*, the study of the human was perceived as separate from that of the laws of nature, Science. This problem was most visibly manifested in the Post-war debate inaugurated by Snow (1959), in which he argued that Humanities and Sciences had become polar opposites to the detriment of Humanities and

that, whilst Science students had some reasonable knowledge of Humanities, Humanities ones were ignorant of the most basic concepts of Science and thus needed to be encouraged to learn some Science. Additionally, he argued that, since Science had mostly been responsible for the Allied victory during the Second World War, it should be allocated more resources.

Snow's characterization of Humanities as a waste of resources is familiar in discussions of the crisis of funding Humanities today internationally. The two fields are predominantly seen as mutually exclusive, serving as the climax of the process of separation began in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the debate is couched in terms that would not be unfamiliar to that period's dominant philosophy, *Utilitarianism*. The comparison between the disciplines in terms of magnitude of social impact, is reminiscent of the views of *Utilitarians*, such as Bentham (1789). It is fundamentally about the *use-value* of knowledge. The perception that Humanities have a lesser value than Sciences has led to reduced Government funding towards the subject area in some countries. That has certainly been the case in Britain in recent years; and looking over the reports of National Humanities Councils in a few countries in the West, the fear of reductions in funding to Humanities is a constant worry.

In his novel, *Hard Times* (1854), published at the height of *utilitarianism*, Dickens satirises the philosophy, especially, its emphasis on the scientific measure of utility, represented, for instance, by Bentham's *happiness algorithm*. Through the aptly named character, Grandgrid, a school teacher opposed to anything that cannot be measured mathematically, the novelist underscores the danger of the obsession with scientific purity and concern with keeping apart the Humanities and Sciences. Thomas Gradgrind is said to have been suspicious of human emotions, such as love and sadness, as they were incalculable. One wonders if old Gradgrind is not alive and well today! If he is, our job is to make sure that he is kept well away from education policy-making. Nevertheless, the perception that Humanities are irrelevant to national development goals will continue to be a major challenge for the discipline for the foreseeable future. We may need to fall back on the more progressive *utilitarianism* of Stuart Mill (1863) who, in opposition to Bentham and his father, argued that the worth of human action and knowledge needed to be based on qualitative rather than quantitative value. Our task here may be to reframe developmental objectives in terms of not only the material needs of the human subject, but also the psycho-social and aesthetic ones as well. For our own survival

as a society, it is important that we do not reduce the measure of knowledge solely to *use-value*, for no society can thrive only on the products of Science and technology alone. Think of Britain without Shakespeare or its museums!

However, it will also be necessary for Humanities to respond imaginatively to the scientific and technological challenges that will necessarily intensify in the coming years. The next fifty years will witness unthinkable discoveries as well as technological inventions. Instead of clinging to the traditional boundaries of our disciplines which, understandably need defending at times, we must also seize the opportunity to explore how new scientific discoveries are transforming the idea of what it means to be human. There was recently a news story of how a man who had had severe injuries to his face received the face of a dead man (Gann, 2015). This is surely an example of how new scientific ideas are changing the very notion of the *Human subject*. Traditionally, the face is considered the central aspect of an individual's identity, but the example cited problematises such a concept. The question is then: if the face is no longer the key to one's identity, what is? That is territory we should be researching. Notions such as that of the *cyborg* are attempts to think of the ways in which we can no longer separate technological extensions to the human body from the body itself in conceptualising *human subjectivity* (Figueroa-Sarriera, Mentor, Gray, 1995). In terms of the curriculum, it might be worth considering, where possible, introducing programmes of study which intersect Humanities and Sciences, for instance, Medical Humanities, and Digital Humanities. We could also develop courses on the history of ideas that fuse the two disciplines, for example, on the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology. Such courses should be made available to students from both fields.

Another enduring problem the Humanities have inherited from its past and which we needs to be re-examined in constructing a viable future discipline is the practice of *essentialising the human subject*. Nineteenth-century *Humanism* and its particular articulation as Humanities was indeed a profound withdrawal from the earlier practices of defining the human subject. However, this radical idea became a constraining orthodoxy, as being human began to refer to an innate core, an essence which, for Descartes and others, was the mind seen as the seat of reason. His *cogito*: "I think, therefore I am," is paradigmatic of the fundamental shift from a divine or external-centred view of knowledge to a human-centred one. His depiction of the core of being as the rational self rather than the received idea of the soul would have a tremendous impact on

knowledge and political life in subsequent centuries. Paine who was intimately involved in both the French and the American revolutions, but whose attempt to inspire a similar revolution in Britain was unsuccessful, was also at the forefront of the *new Humanism*. In his book, Paine (1791) advocated the “inalienable rights of man.” In the same period, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Rousseau, 1762: 1.) proclaimed “man is born free, but he is everywhere in Chains.”

However, this radical reading of the human subject was partial and exclusive. As Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) pointed out, this heady celebration of “the rights of Man,” was indeed, just that—the privileging of the rights of men over those of women. She specifically criticised the way rationality was seen as a male preserve. Equally, Equiano (1789), a former slave who had bought himself out of slavery, contended that the practice of slavery illustrated the racialization of the dominant idea of the human. This criticism alerts us to the ways in which the emergence of the human as a subject of modern knowledge was complicit with existing power relations, foregrounding how even conceptual categories that are proposed to counter limiting ones can also produce other forms of exclusions. In developing an agenda for the future of Humanities in Africa, we need to ensure that our notions of the *Human subject* are always probed for possible areas of exclusion. Recently, there has been a lot of debate in Malawi and Africa generally about homosexuality. Clearly, this is a topic that Humanities in Malawi and Africa should engage with, exploring the conditions under which certain forms of sexualities are excluded from dominant subjectivities.

Humanism as the return of the repressed

It is clear that as the discovery of the Human subject in the Renaissance period and its rediscovery and further development in the nineteenth century opened up a new intellectual and imaginative territory, just as it is evident that such advances were also undermined by the residual ideology - it unwittingly served as a site for the reconstitution of the discarded religious concepts of self-hood. Thus, the privileging of rationality over religious being had not completely overhauled the latter, but only displaced it onto the former. Rationality and “rational man” became the new object of worship. Thus, *Humanism* was a secular religion, a fact that is openly admitted by the various Humanist organisations of the time (Davies, 1997: 28). Paine and Comte sought to set up institutions for the worship of the Human. Comte’s proposal included rituals and priests that were similar to those of the Church. Thus, Humanism, seemed to transfer the powers that had hitherto been arrogated to

God to the entity of the human, but without changing the fundamental conception of *being as essence*.

Although criticised by some radical nineteenth-century thinkers such as Nietzsche and Marx, this essentialism was to form the dominant paradigm for the Humanities until the rise of Post-Structuralism and Post-Marxism from the middle of the late twentieth century. In literary criticism, it was embodied in the assumption that any literary text transparently conveys a universal truth about human nature, an approach that was advanced and promoted by Leavis (1960). It dominated the study of literature in English Departments throughout the world for the most part of the twentieth century, including Chancellor College, University of Malawi. Its application of the universalising tendency to African literature did not go unchallenged. Achebe (1973: 52-53) rebuked an African exponent of the method, saying “[he] is proposing that [...] I renounce my vision which [...] is necessarily local and particular. [...] He has simply and uncritically accepted the prevailing norms of colonialist criticism.” In the Department of Human Behaviour, Anthropological textbooks were still premised on the idea of an essential subject, in terms of which traditional African societies were referred to as “primitive societies.” Evidently, Humanities in Africa, as part of a global academic formation, were employing concepts of the *human subject* that were actively diminishing the humanity of Africans, without the power or authority to challenge such concepts, since they constituted the dominant *legitimizing discursive formation* (Foucault, 1972).

The critique of the essentialist subject and its implications for the future of Humanities

It is significant that whilst the essentialist subject was still part of the dominant thinking in Humanities in Africa, internationally there were beginning to emerge serious doubts about the sustainability of such an approach. It was the rise of Post-Structuralism and Post-Marxism in the 1970s and 1980s that challenged it significantly. That was mostly advanced through the development of Post-colonial theory and Cultural Studies, disciplines which had translated the Post-Structuralist and Post-Marxist cultural theory to the concerns of Post-colonial societies. Among others, Foucault’s notion of the *subject* and that of *discourse* played and still play an important part in Humanities today, not only in Africa and the Post-colonial world, but internationally as well.

Taking his concept of the *subject* first, Foucault founded it on the insights of the criticism of “universal Man” proposed by Nietzsche. Nietzsche argued against the idea that there was some timeless essence that defined being Human. It is impossible to maintain that view

in the context, for example, of the theory of evolution which posits “Man” or being Human as one, among a spectrum of human-like forms. Recasting that view, Foucault (1977: 143) advises “Where the soul pretends unification or the self fabricates a coherent identity,” one “sets out to study the beginning—the numberless beginnings whose faint traces and hints of colour are rarely seen by an historical eye.” A number of Post-colonial critics, including those from Africa and of African origin have appropriated Foucault’s notion of the *subject*, notably Mbembe (2001), for the analysis of African social formations. Mbembe particularly demonstrates how the idea of the detotalised and *decentred subject* proposed by Foucault can illuminate the relationship between rulers and the ruled in contemporary Africa. This is the kind of project that should be developed further in African Humanities. As part of our contribution to understanding multiple local and global locations of the human subject today, we need to be asking about how *African subjects* are dispersed in heterogeneous discourses of formed society. In Malawi, for instance, one potentially productive area is the study of the ways in which subjectivity is distributed across the macro-politics of the national and the micro-ones of ethnicity and regionalism.

A related question would entail examining how such *subject-formations* are imagined or projected in everyday practice, cultural and linguistic representations. This is very much the terrain of Foucault’s notion of *discourse* which has done a lot to advance our understanding of social formations in Humanities today. Foucault uses the concept to describe how language and representations are linked to the question of power and knowledge. He reminds us of how disciplinary formations are not objective descriptions of knowledge, but are related to social and political hierarchies seemingly far removed from them. His concept can be seen in Said (1978) and Mudimbe (1990). I will return to this point in the next section; for now, however, suffice to say it will be our ability to attend to how institutional processes of knowledge production relate to the production of *subjectivity* and *discourses* in the wider society that will ensure that Humanities in Africa remain both innovative and productive in the twenty-first century.

Foucault’s contemporary, Althusser, has equally made an important intervention in the ways in which the *human subject* is viewed in Humanities today. Like the former, he expounds the idea that the *human subject* is socially produced, but, unlike the former, he believes that the notion of production needs to be located, albeit in a revised form, in the Marxist materialist tradition. Marx made one of the major interventions in the nineteenth-

century, advocating a move away from the traditional Humanist idea of the *human subject*. In his *de-essentialisation* of the *human subject*, he argued that it be regarded as a product of the structural socio-economic relations particular to a mode of production, saying “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx, 1859: 4). So, whilst Nietzsche bequeathed to us the *discursive-deconstructive mode* of critique rearticulated by Foucault, Marx offered the conception of the human as formed by the political economy. It is that notion that Althusser develops into his concept of the *human subject*. He regards the *subject* as produced through what he terms the process of *ideological interpellation*. He argues that we are born as *individuals*, but are transformed into *subjects* of a particular ideological formation by being embedded and reconstructed in terms of the values of a given society through *ideological state apparatuses*, such as religion and education (Althusser, 1970).

Althusser outlines an important research project for us, that is, to try and understand the ways in which human subjects are produced by the particular processes of ideological *interpellation* in Africa. As our society enters the next phase of significant industrial production through mineral extraction and even oil extraction, which will transform our social relations, our mores and indeed our environment, both natural and built, Humanities should play an important role in mapping out how the human is being affected by all the new forces at work in the country. It will be in that way that we will be undertaking *epistemological agency*, for as Marx (1845: 15) observed “philosophers have only interpreted the world, [...] the point is to change it.” The question for us then becomes, “how do we as Humanities scholars change the world and how do we develop capacities and strategies to do so effectively?”

Important as Marxism has been, it has itself been subject to criticism from both within and without. Some of the weaknesses highlighted can form an important platform for rethinking Humanities in Africa. From within, it has been criticised, for instance, by *Cultural Studies* and Cultural Materialism (Hall, 1996: 25-46) for privileging the infrastructure over ideology. Even more relevant to us here today is the *World-systems* theory advanced principally by Wallerstein (1974), which argues that, since the 15th century, starting with the so-called voyages of exploration, the whole world has been formed into a single system of economic production and relations of production. The theory is an attempt to move beyond classical Marxism, whilst accounting for the complex relations between *Third-World* and *First-World* countries in the formation of Capitalism.

Furthermore, it investigates the ways in which the World-system produces a certain *universalism of consciousness*. It offers a framework for Humanities in Africa to reflect on how the contemporary global system *interpellates* Africans into subjects of global Capitalism. We could, in this respect, raise questions, for example, about the effects of the neo-liberal policies sponsored by the IMF and the World Bank on the conception and practices of human *subjectivity* in Africa today.

We can thus summarise the general orientation of Humanities as a tension between these two modes of reading, between, on the one hand, a tendency to see certain human subjects and cultural and artistic practices as purveyors of enduring essential meanings, on the other, the idea that the *human subject* and its cultural and social products are a function of ideological, discursive or economic production. I would thus propose that in reconstituting Humanities in Africa for the future, we need to employ judiciously both sides. Undoubtedly, the constructivist approaches have done a lot to demonstrate how under the banner of the Human as universal and undifferentiated, many atrocities have been meted out against other human beings deemed less so. There is also a profound contradiction in the fact that some of the radical ideas on the *human subject*, such as Nietzsche's, were employed to enforce violent racial stratification, for example, in the Jewish Holocaust in Germany. For Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), the Holocaust showed reason as inherently barbaric. What they suggest is that as Humanities scholars we must not assume the pursuit of rationality as an end in itself. Ethics should mediate the pursuit of rationality. Additionally, we need to take into account the relationship between *affect* or emotion and subjectivity, probing how *affect* is implicated in the formation of contemporary subjectivity in Africa.

It is perhaps in terms of affect that I struggle against the radical rejections of the concept of the *human subject* proposed by some Post-structuralists, memorably captured in Barthes's phrase, "The Author is Dead" (1967). The proposal to do away with the subject could be seen as illustrating the form of rationality that Adorno and Horkheimer warn against. Indeed, Spivak has accused such theorists of secretly reinstalling the *human subject* not as a *universal subject*, but as a Western *sovereign subject* (1988: 271-274). It is also the case that the proposed absolute *detritorialisation of the Subject* can only be advanced in a context where the *human subject* is a secure category, but it is difficult to do so where historically people have been denied any claim to full subjectivity, such as in Africa. In reformulating the future of Humanities in Africa, we need not dislodge the *human*

subject from our purview, but make it the centre of the discipline.

Even so, we also need to study the relationship between *virtual lives* and *real lives*. Information technology offers tremendous opportunities for Humanities research. A vast number of people in the world and in Malawi spend a lot of time on the mobile phone and the Internet. It is not unusual nowadays to see people seating together, but each one of them busy on the phone or the Internet, communicating with someone else — that is a new way of sharing space. We should be asking: what are the ontological issues arising out of the relationship between the *virtual* and real space as well as from the constant simultaneous inhabitation of the *virtual* and *real*? Here, it is the question of *double-subjectivity* and *double-locations* that is worth exploring. Postmodernist theorists such as Baudrillard (1991) have been asking profound questions about the relationship between the *real* and the *virtual* after the intervention of television and other computing technologies in day-today practice. Reality Television programmes such as *Big Brother* call into question the distinction between the *televisual-real* and *lived-real*, since what we watch in these programmes are real people performing themselves and even reinventing themselves for the sake of making a good television programme. There is also the even more interesting question: to what extent do we have a reality outside *televisual* and *virtual representation*? However, again, we need to be sure that in the interrogation of the relationship between the *real* and the *virtual*, we work, with what Levinas (1961: 26) calls an *ontological distance* from the Other and ensure that we do not *aestheticise the space of the Other* in the way in which Baudrillard (1991) does in the claim that “The Gulf War did not take place.”

Evidently, Humanities in Africa will be contending with similar issues to those on the international agenda. That will require keeping up with developments in international critical and cultural theory in order to access new scholarship that could contribute to research into the local manifestations of global issues. There will be need to train African scholars internationally, even when African Universities will have achieved self-sufficiency in training research students. Travel and short-term attachments to other institutions in Africa and abroad will be vital in ensuring that African Humanities scholars effectively participate in debates and discussions of the most current ideas in the field. That will require sufficient resourcing as well as effective research development strategies. Furthermore, governments and Universities will need to consider seriously the formation of national or regional Humanities Academies, similar to the British Academy. Over and

above the Universities, the British Academy promotes advanced Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences by raising funds from government and other organisations to fund research. The British academy is for the Humanities what the Royal Academy is for Sciences. The two institutions also confer the highest honours to academics in the form of Fellowships which have an additional status to the Professorship. As the number of Universities is likely to increase in Malawi and Africa generally, an institutional level that consolidates, advances and promotes Humanities research over and above the efforts of individual Universities is required.

Towards African Humanities

As indicated at the beginning of the paper, there is a sense in which Humanities in Africa are part of the historical formation of Humanities globally. In this respect, international Humanities will be an important basis for rethinking the future of Humanities in Africa. Nevertheless, Humanities in Africa are also a particular formation--they are not merely an extension of global Humanities. Thus, we can describe the discipline as a *hybrid knowledge practice*. As a function of their geographical and cultural context, Humanities in Africa have historically had to adapt international *knowledge* to local conditions. Therefore, in refashioning the discipline, we need to build on such indigenising effort, making it more African in its theory as well as methods, of course, without cutting off completely from our international historical heritage. That entails shifting from *Humanities in Africa* to *African Humanities*.

The concept of *African Humanities* necessarily implies a discipline that is particular, a subset of a general global Humanities. *African Humanities* is about the identity of the academic practice of Humanities on the continent, whether it is an African practice in the way in which traditional African medicine is. It implies that it is an academic practice belonging to and practiced by a group of scholars geographically or culturally located in Africa, but with the possibility of looking at the human in general. In this context, the agenda for the future entails greater ownership of the discipline in the way in which its theories and methods are produced and disseminated, of the ways in which we teach and what we teach. It requires greater autonomy of thought, method, research and pedagogical practice. The question then is: "how do we develop a capacity for working with Western theories, whilst engendering epistemological and pedagogical agency as well as autonomy?" In order to shift the balance towards the local production of knowledge in African Humanities, there is need to deconstruct received and

dominant theories and methodologies in the field. We must also adapt them to our local circumstances and, having done so, reconstitute them as forms of local *self-apprehension* and expression (Soyinka, 1976: viii-ix). To begin with, an effective African Humanities must be a continuation of the legacy of *self-determination* which informed the founding and the function of Post-colonial Higher education in the years following independence.

It is well known that Humanities students and scholars had been at the forefront of decolonisation in Africa. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was an important assertion of *cultural decolonisation*, an attempt to revalorise the colonial representation of African culture as "primitive." Senghor, the first President of Senegal, was a leading member of the *Négritude movement* which asserted the value of indigenous culture against colonial cultural denigration (Irele, 2011). Here in Malawi, writers such as Rubadiri and Chiume, additionally took an active role in the formal resistance of the colonial regime. Indeed, the University of Malawi was founded as a part of the desire to reduce dependency on other countries with regard to education. It was an early expression of political autonomy. I have been told, but it has not yet been independently verified, that some of the seed money for starting the University of Malawi, included funds collected by Malawian students studying at the University of Makerere, including the Bwanausi brothers. Whether this story is true or not, there was certainly the desire by the Malawian nationalists to provide opportunities for young Malawians to study at home, instead of having to rely on the few places available at the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland and elsewhere. The Humanities were at the centre of the curriculum of the University as part of the established British education system, but also for the particular reason that Malawi needed a number of trained senior civil servants to fill in the gaps created by the departing colonial officials and also for the extension of the civil service's reach within the territory. The University's Humanities programme was vital to the enhancement of the human resource capacity of Post-colonial Malawi, for example, in its training of teachers and teacher-trainers. Thus, Humanities were not only central to decolonisation, but also to the production of the much-needed Post-colonial manpower.

It is to the extent that the Humanities came to us as a practice that was connected to colonial domination that specifying an African Humanities does involve a continuation of the process of *decolonisation*. It is in this regard that historically there has been a number of efforts at the critique of received knowledge. We can legitimately consider

them as having laid the foundation for an *African Humanities*. These have mostly focussed on decolonising African epistemology. One of the best examples is Ngugi's and his colleagues' 1968 famous proposal for the abolition of the Department of English at the University of Nairobi and its replacement with a Department of Literature and a corresponding Department of Languages (Ngugi, 1972). The group challenged the connection between the way disciplines are defined and located within the African academy. They contended that the manner in which disciplines are organised in an institution is not innocent, but an expression of a particular ideology. The presence of an English Department in an African University where there was no Department of African Languages perpetuated cultural colonialism by implying that English was inherently a more worthy language of academic study than African languages. The lesson from this critique is that in rethinking the future of Humanities, we need to reflect on how Humanities are located in relation to other disciplines within the University in order to illuminate underlying power relations. We need to ask: "are there legacies of hierarchies within the structure and *knowledge map* of the University which need changing?"

Ngugi and his colleagues also argued that the ways in which the syllabus was organised had not taken into account the Post-colonial African context of the University. In terms of its cartography of knowledge, the University was constitutively outside the Post-colonial formation, as if independence had not taken place. Except in name, it was a foreign institution located in Africa, in the way in which the American University in Cairo is. Thus, the University of Nairobi was an ideological apparatus for *interpellating* the Kenyan students as Universal Subjects, without regard to their cultural specificity. What Ngugi and his colleagues had pointed out was not simply a matter of debate—it was a historical fact, but, one that had been forgotten in the transition from colonial rule to independence. The University of Nairobi, as an off-shoot of Makerere University, which itself had been a University of London college, had patently not been founded on African nationalist principles, but rather British colonial interests.

So Ngugi and his colleagues were performing a belated, but important review of how institutions derived from the West could be redesigned to fit in with the aims and goals of nationalist education. They proposed to reverse that situation and ensure that the institution approached the students first and foremost as Post-colonial African subjects. To do that, they suggested that students start learning about their immediate environment. With regard to literature they demanded that students begin by studying their own literature and progressively moving through that of the African Diaspora, the *Third-Word* and then that

of Eastern and Western Europe. The structure of pedagogical practice here is to begin with self-knowledge and then knowledge of the *Other* in a philosophy that promotes both autonomy and interdependence and does not deflate the self in deference to *alterity*. Ngugi extended this critique of what might be called *Neo-Colonial epistemologies* to language, arguing that language is not a transparent tool for communication, but a bearer of particular values and, thus, the continued use of the English language in Africa and low investment in African languages meant that Post-colonial Africa was continuing with the colonial project of acculturation (Ngugi, 1986). In his call for the teaching and use of African languages within higher education and creative writing, he was advancing a distinctly *African Post-colonial epistemology* through which a Post-colonial African human subject, as opposed to a colonial one, could be produced ideologically and discursively. Ngugi and others were asking fundamental questions about the interplay between ideology and the institutionalisation of knowledge. In essence, they were echoing Foucault's call to attend to the relationship between knowledge and power referred to earlier. They provide an example of how one can draw on Western knowledge to ask new questions about a specifically African context. It is well known that Ngugi's approach to cultural decolonisation was inspired by Marxism, among others, but his Marxism was not doctrinaire — it easily mixed matters of political economy with those of Nationalism as well as Leavisite criticism.

The attempt to decolonise knowledge at the University of Nairobi had broader repercussions on the continent. The University of Malawi was caught up in that movement directly, as James Stewart, who had been the acting Head, thus, on the receiving end of Ngugi's memorandum at the University of Nairobi, became the Head of the English Department at Chancellor College. We do not know why Stewart left Nairobi. Whatever misgivings he may have had about Ngugi's ideas, in Malawi, he presided over an overhaul of the English syllabus. The new syllabus was both Western and African. So the students were taught Shakespeare, Achebe, Ngugi and Soyinka, among others. That was not a typical syllabus of an English Department in Britain or the USA. The example of Stewart's leadership in indigenising the curriculum of an English Department demonstrates the importance of leadership in rethinking the status quo and implementing change. It would be disingenuous to ignore the racial identity of the agent of change in a context where a few years before Stewart arrived, the question of White leadership had caused an irreparable schism among the Post-colonial leadership. From an Afrocentric perspective, it could be read as a limited intervention that may have been motivated by the desire for professional self-preservation. However, from a constructivist

viewpoint, Stewart's race was not as important as his ability to unlearn the old habits and, not only affiliate himself with the new, but become one of its principal advocates. The ideology he disengaged from was one that enveloped African academics as well, many of whom underwent their own form of *self-decolonisation*. Thus, as we reflect on the future of the field, we need to ensure that we consciously foster research and pedagogical leadership within Departments, separately or in conjunction with administrative leadership.

The conscious development of research and pedagogical leaders within the institutions should also foreground the importance of knowledge reproduction within and beyond the institutions. In this context, I find Bourdieu's and Passeron's (1970) idea of knowledge as *cultural or symbolic capital* extremely helpful. In their view, the knowledge we produce and disseminate gives us *cultural capital*, as it enables us access, define and reproduce social and political power. The English Department at the University of Malawi produced and reproduced *cultural capital*, not only thorough teaching and research, but also by public dissemination of knowledge. That was exemplified markedly by Adrian Roscoe, a former colleague of Stewart's at the University of Nairobi, who joined the Department and published some seminal work on African and especially East African and Malawian writing whilst at the Chancellor College (Roscoe, 1977). He was, together with others in the Department, prominent in setting up the *Malawi Writers Series*. Equally important was the promotion of indigenous content in teaching and research by some Malawian academics: Felix Mnthali, Steve Chimombo and Jack Mapanje, Lupenga Mphande and Enoch Timpuza-Mvula were all involved in projects of cultural retrieval, especially of orature, and important journals, such as *Outlook*, *Kalulu*, *Odi*, and *Umodzi* were established to promote orature and indigenous writing. The Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) radio programmes such as *Writers Corner*, *University Magazine*, and *Theatre of the Air* became sites of exploration of local arts and concepts of representation. Such sites and the ideas they engendered were not only contributing to the establishment of a research paradigm in *African Humanities*, but they were also useful tools for transforming the teaching of the next generation of university and school teachers, translating the new knowledge into active pedagogical content and practice.

Equally visible was the decolonising curricular and research effort of the History Department which was famous for its engaging staff-student seminars. What stands out there is the value of team work and clear research and academic leadership. J.B Webster, as Professor of History in the mid-seventies, did a lot to consolidate the effort to construct a Malawian Historiography. It was quite evident that the Department was working in close

intellectual proximity with other departments in the region and beyond, for instance, in Dar es Salaam where radical historians, such as Terrence Ranger and Walter Rodney, were challenging received historiographies. It was also, perhaps, the idea of research and teaching as being part of a cultural and political project that was at the centre of the efforts to transform teaching and Research in these Departments. Hall (1996) makes an important distinction between *academic work* and *intellectual work*, with the former described as essentially doing academic work as a job and the latter as a way of life. There was a palpable sense in the History Department of teaching, learning and research as a serious way of life. I think that is a practice worth emulating as we seek to transform the Humanities in the future. Such a view also invigorates teaching, as students become aware that they are not just being fed information, but they are involved in something broader than their class work, in a political project of national interest. It is important to share with our students how our approach to what we are teaching and researching feeds into broader *national and international knowledge formation*.

In his seminal work, Kaufmann (1977) says the challenge to Humanities is the way in which students are taught. In his view, we must train students to think critically, rather than just give them information. With the easy availability of academic information on the internet, teaching is particularly challenged to do more than impart information. We need to embed critical thinking, in the full spectrum of our activities – questioning and inquiring should be the basis of our teaching and research practice. That can be allied to the more political view of pedagogy provided by Frere (1970), in which teaching serves as a mode of *conscientisation*, of awakening students to their ideological location in the world and the potential of knowledge as a practice of intervention. I hope we can see more of that in the future and that should help motivate students to continue engaging with their disciplines long after graduation.

I am also intrigued by Kaufmann's call for Humanities teachers to be visionaries. I would class the teachers I have mentioned here as among some of the visionary teachers the University of Malawi had. We need to emulate their examples and see how they can enrich our teaching and research in future. What I am suggesting is that we need to study the Ngugis, the Stewarts, the Mnthalis, Chimombos and others in preparing for an agenda for the future of African Humanities. I am also aware that I have so far been using a collaborative model of Humanities teaching and research. That is not how Humanities are perceived usually: they are seen as involving a more individualist than the collaborative style typical of scientific research. However, in reality there is a lot of collaboration within Humanities, but

we need to foreground it much more. That will also enhance the sense of an intellectual rather than just an academic community. The contributions I have been describing, especially in the History Department show the value of team work, of how senior members of staff enable junior members and students, making research not purely individualist or competitive, but an on-going collaborative practice. In the end, successful teaching and research is about spreading good practice across a team in a department, faculty or the university as a whole.

The *counter-hegemonic gesture* has sometimes entailed the extension of Western conceptual categories to African contexts, demonstrating that exclusion of the African experience from main-stream disciplinary concerns had less to do with the desire to maintain the legitimating rules of knowledge than the exercise of colonial and Neo-colonial ethnocentrism. There have been some memorable attempts in this regard, especially in Philosophy. One can recall the important contributions of the Ghanaian Philosopher Wiredu (1980) which sought to prove that Western philosophical categories could be applied to African philosophy, especially in the area of epistemology and ontology. Additionally, the work of the Kenyan scholar, Oruka (1990), was pioneering in promoting *Sage-Philosophy* as a basis for researching and conceptualising indigenous African philosophy, observing that most of Pre-Socratic Philosophers, like Thales, were ordinary and usually unschooled, but they reflected on philosophical issues deeply and doing so in the manner reminiscent of wise old people in Africa. He noted that Ancient Greek Philosophy was to a large extent based on the thinking of Sages. He set out to find such Sages in Kenya and to collect their philosophical wisdom and analyse it. He called this philosophy *Sagacity*. Oruka's work and also the work on orature at the University of Malawi generally had an impact on the Chancellor College Philosophy Department. Kaphagawani's and Chidammodzi's research into indigenous Malawian philosophy was an example of such a line of inquiry. This effort is similar to that of theologians such as Mbiti (1969) who contested the view that traditional African society was irreligious and pagan. Mbiti recovered the concept of God, among others, within traditional African cosmology. It can also be seen in the application of various received critical approaches such as Marxism, Post-Structuralism and Leavisite and New Criticism to African literature. This is a strategy that

may come in handy in rethinking the future of the Humanities.

Nevertheless, though the extension of Western concepts to an African context is an invaluable contestation of exclusion of African experience from Western theory, it is limited, as it merely applies such categories than confront their foundations. A more radical approach entails producing indigenous models, principally by using dominant categories and modes of legitimation to specify a different mode of cognition. In this case, *appropriation* moves into *transformative adaptation* and then *reconstitution* into a recognisably new form. Soyinka offers an excellent example of such a practice. In his essay “‘The Fourth Stage,’” (Soyinka, 1976), he puts Nietzschean ideas on Greek Tragedy in a creative tension with Yoruba narratives of origin and constructs homologies between them which he reworks into his own cosmological framework, on the basis of which he constructs a new theoretical and aesthetic idiom that he deploys in his creative work. Using his framework, Soyinka is also able to reinterpret Greek Tragedy, for example, in *The Strong Breed* (1973) as primarily a conflict of existential choice between *being-in-itself* and *being-for-the-Other*. That is a different approach from the traditional reading of the genre as driven by determinism. He elaborates his theory in his rewriting of Euripides’ *The Bacchae* (1973). The trajectory of Soyinka’s thought offers an exemplary pathway for *semiotising ourselves*. It is in essence a Phenomenological project in that he starts from his own experience and moment in history, accepting both his acculturation in European thought and socialisation into Yoruba cosmology, language and culture as his point of departure and then brings the two into a dynamic interplay that yields a third term that is neither one nor the other, but a veritably new conceptual formation and cultural practice.

The Malawian writer, Steve Chimombo, mines the same vein as Soyinka in his recovery of the Napolo and Mbona *narratives of origin*, providing him with an elaborate framework for illuminating historical sites of political and cultural transition and their concomitant social crises. That is explored in his play the *Rainmaker* (1987) and *Napolo Poems* (1995). He has formalised his aesthetic principles in his theory of *Ulimbaso* which he defines as “a dynamic theory of art creation and appreciation based on how the Chewaman articulates his own artistic vision” (Chimombo, 1988, p. vii). When I had earlier looked at Chimombo’s theory it looked slightly implausible, but on re-examining it, I am struck by its radical attempt to categorise Malawian arts in terms of a cultural concept from indigenous culture. Besides, having compared it with the concept of

Napantla (in-between-ness) proposed by the American-Mexican theorist Anzaldua (1999), it is clear that it is part of a significant Third World attempt to *re-signify* its cultural concepts. I have, thus, concluded that Chimombo theory is an important effort at *Self-Semiotisation*, constituting an example we can take forward in producing an African Humanities. The question remains, however, “why did Anzaldua’s similarly indigenous concept take off and Chimombo’s did not?” There are many possible reasons for that, I am sure, but one of them is the differential location of the two authors in the *World-System of knowledge*. Within the *centre-periphery* model that arguably still structures *the circuit of international knowledge production*, the capacity of Chimombo’s work to assemble value around itself is diminished by its location. Therefore, in developing an African Humanities, serious consideration should be given to how such knowledge will be plugged onto the *international knowledge circuit*. We may need to create *docking points* for such work along the circuit, so it can participate in the international current of ideas, relaying and modifying their flow. Collaboration will be important in this regard too. There is need for co-publishing arrangements with publishing houses in the West and, where resources allow, greater investment in promoting indigenously-produced work.

The key to the success of Anzaldua’s concept, apart from her location in the USA, is that it emerged at a time when a suitable conceptual docking point was available on the *international knowledge circuit*. It arrived on the scene at the same time as Bhabha’s popular work which similarly proposes *in-betweenness* as an important critical concept (Bhabha, 1994), whereas there is no evidence of a similarly enabling contextual factor for Chimombo’s concept. The challenge then is not only one of creating indigenous concepts, but also of ensuring that they are strategically encoded on existing conceptual categories on the circuit of the *ruling discursive formation*. The alternative would be to create an entirely *new discursive formation*, which must, of course remain the ultimate aim, but, as it requires not only the capacity to engender new terms, but also to control the material means of knowledge production and reproduction, for the time being, we must learn to plug our knowledge into enabling elements of the international circuit. As Foucault reminds us knowledge is intimately linked to formations of power both within the academy and outside. In this context, the ability to rethink the humanities entails, in the short term, the strategic occupation of the *World-System of knowledge* and, in the long run, the complete transformation of its power structure.

Inventing entirely new concepts or discursive formations is not the only way we can engender and advance African Humanities. An African Humanities can be achieved by repatriating concepts from the *international circuit of ideas* that are based on African culture and employing them in the study of African societies and cultures. We could also compare and contrast how their international usage relates to the original indigenous use or modern Post-colonial forms. I am thinking here of the term *fetishism* which is one of the key terms in Marxism as well and Psychoanalysis which originated in Africa (Pietz, 1985, pp. 5-17). Evidently, the concept has evolved through its entry in European culture and thought as well as colonial and Post-colonial Africa. In reformulating an African Humanities, we could ask: “how can the idea of the *fetish* help us interpret not only traditional African society, but our Post-colonial experience of modernity as well?” How can it help us explain the particular forms of *commodification* and *materialism* or, what we might translate as, *chintumwalisation*, in contemporary African societies, including Malawi? The proposed practice would contribute to an archaeology of African concepts in both the local and international archive and, moreover, would substantially undermine the myth that Africans have not contributed significantly to the development of international knowledge.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we should say looking at the history of Humanities in Africa and the current situation, the future looks bright, but it will be even more so if we move towards greater intellectual autonomy and specify more concretely a project of *African Humanities*. That is easier said than done. In order to embark on that journey we should learn from the history of the development of Humanities themselves. Humanities emerged from *Humanism* which was a form of counter-identification with the then dominant idea, of a theocentric order. It advocated a secular vision of the world, but it then itself became an occluding dogma as the idea of the human was circumscribed and *essentialised*. The *de-essentialisation* of the human subject was much needed, but it also went too far, to almost an anti-human level, at least some of it. It is now time to *rehumanise the human subject*, but not to develop another eternally privileged space, but to assert the ethical importance of being human, even as we must constantly submit our notion of the ethical to critical reflection. In conclusion, the lesson of history for now and the future is that we must carry out a *dialectic of critique, affirmation and then critique*. Perhaps, there might yet be renewed uses for Hegel’s dialectics, though his view of dialectics patently did not include Humanities in Africa or *African Humanities* (Hegel, 1837).

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